

Perversion and Subversion: Mother Guidance and Illicit Sexuality in Ibn Dāniyāl's Shadow Play

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In memory of Farouk Mustafa¹



The shadow plays of Ibn Dāniyāl are the first well-developed examples of Arabic drama that have come down to us,² and the only examples of Arabic drama from the medieval period. *Ṭayf al-Khayāl* is the first in a sequence of three plays written at the turn of the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries by Ibn Dāniyāl,³ a refugee ophthalmologist who fled from Mosul in 1261, at the age of 14, to settle in Mamluk Cairo along with a flood of other refugees driven

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- 1 I first started working on Ibn Daniyal's shadow plays in 2009, reading them with Professor Farouk Mustafa in his office in Pick Hall at the University of Chicago, to puzzle out the difficult mixture of high literary virtuosity, and low-life cant. I translated some excerpts for a staged-reading in 2010, and Ustādh Farouk ribbed me for cutting out some of the rudest bits. Ustādh Farouk passed away in 2013, and I have not had the opportunity to stage an unexpurgated version, but in his memory, I have made sure not to leave out any rude bits from this paper. I would also like to acknowledge Lisa Nielson, Case Western Reserve University, the organizer of a special session, "Gender, Culture and Trade in the Medieval Islamic World (seventh-fifteenth centuries)" at the 49th International Congress on Medieval Studies in Kalamazoo, May 2014 at which a version of this paper was given. In addition, I would like to credit Li Guo's excellent study and translation of Ibn Daniyal's play. While the translations in this study are my own, made before reading Guo's book, it has since greatly facilitated this study.
 - 2 For a detailed description of the kinds of drama that preceded Ibn Dāniyāl's play, including some descriptions of earlier performances, and frameworks for semi-improvised dramas, see Shmuel Moreh, *Live Theatre and Dramatic Literature in the Medieval Arab World* (New York, 1992).
 - 3 On the basis of an analysis of Ibn Dāniyāl's oeuvre, Li Guo dates the shadow plays (which recycle much earlier material) towards the end of the thirteenth century or the beginning of the fourteenth century: Li Guo, *The Performing Arts in Medieval Islam: Shadow Play and Popular Poetry in Ibn Dāniyāl's Mamluk Cairo* (Leiden, 2012), pp. 108–11.

by the Mongol incursions into Iraq and Syria.⁴ The plays of Ibn Dāniyāl, long recognized as of unique importance for the history of Arabic literary forms, have increasingly gained scholarly attention for their creative virtuosity and as a great reservoir of information for social history. The publication of an unexpurgated edition of the text of the plays in 1992⁵ has been the catalyst for intensified interest.⁶ The present study is aimed to contribute to this burgeoning field of Ibn Dāniyāl studies through a close reading of a particular set of themes to be found in one of these plays. I will explore the ways in which the first of the three plays, *Ṭayf al-Khayāl*, negotiates a web of tensions between established norms and the behaviors that subvert them, foregrounding questions about normative practices and understandings in the field of gender, sexuality, marriage, and reproduction.

The action of the play takes place against the background of a campaign against vice in Cairo conducted by the Sultan Baybars a couple of decades earlier in 1267,⁷ and Ibn Dāniyāl's lively pen describes the Cairo demi-monde that Baybars sought to suppress by closing down the taverns and brothels. It is a world teeming with pimps, prostitutes, rent-boys, rapists, drunkards (and the Jews and Christians who supply them with alcohol), hashish-smokers, pederasts, sodomites, catamites, and those who switch between sexual roles. Li Guo indicates that shadow plays were performed in the taverns, among other places,⁸ and so we may posit a certain organic connection between the ideal

4 Guo, *Performing Arts*, p. 11.

5 Ibn Dāniyāl, Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Yūsuf, *Three Shadow Plays* (Cambridge, 1992).

6 After the pioneering contributions of Kahle, Jacobs, Landau, and Moreh (For these contributions, see the bibliography following the introduction: Ibn Dāniyāl's *Three Shadow Plays*, pp. 29–30), the publication of the Kahle edition has been followed by important contributions by Francesca Corrao, *Il Riso il Comico e la Festa al Cairo nel XIII Secolo—Il Teatro Delle Ombre di Ibn Daniyal* (Roma, 1996); Amila Butorović, *Sociology of Popular Drama in Medieval Egypt: Ibn Dāniyāl and his Shadow Plays* (PhD dissertation, McGill University, 1997); Li Guo, who before his *Performing Arts*, wrote several articles dealing with various aspects of Ibn Dāniyāl in the context of Mamluk literary and social life, including “Paradise Lost: Ibn Dāniyāl's Response to Sultan Baybars' Campaign against Vice in Cairo,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121.2 (2001), pp. 219–35. There have also been a number of articles published, including those by Cyrus Ali Zargar, “The Satiric Method of Ibn Dāniyāl: Morality and Anti-Morality in ‘Ṭayf al-Khayāl,’” *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 37.1 (2006), 68–108; and Alain George, “The Illustrations of the Maqāmāt and the Shadow Play,” *Muqarnas* 28 (2011), pp. 1–42. The first English translation of all three of Ibn Dāniyāl's plays, is published as *Theatre from Medieval Cairo: The Ibn Dāniyāl Trilogy*, ed. and trans. Safi Mahfouz and Marvin Carlson (New York, 2013), which also contains reference to previous translations in other European languages (p. xiii). These translations do not, however, equal Guo's translation in accuracy or literary merit.

7 See Guo, *Performing Arts*, pp. 3–4 (“Campaign against Vice”).

8 See Guo, *Performing Arts*, p. 93.

imagined audience of these plays, and the denizens of the Cairo demi-monde depicted on stage. The plays also cross social boundaries, satirizing characters of all social classes and professions, linked by the modes of parody and grotesque.

Ibn Dāniyāl's plays belong to the literary mode of *mujūn*: "licentiousness,"⁹ transgressive poetics that generate delight by crossing the boundaries of conventional linguistic modesty, and by describing actions that violate the boundaries of conventional social behavior. This transgression is usually descriptive, rather than directly performative. Just as the acts of supreme violence in Greek tragedy are usually performed off-stage, to be described by a witness or a chorus, so the acts of sexual transgression in Ibn Dāniyāl's play belong off-stage.

Ṭayf al-Khayāl is structured around a series of satirical and parodic poems (*qaṣīda*, *urjūza*, *muwassṣaḥ*) that imitate serious poetic forms but with ridiculous, grotesque and obscene content. Many of these poems existed in some form before Ibn Dāniyāl drew them together into a shadow play.¹⁰ The formal poems are connected by passages of more vernacular rhymed prose (*saǧʿ*) in which the dramatic action is advanced, rather like the recitative which links the arias in an opera. The prose passages are less formally structured, but are nevertheless marked by energetic rhymes and rhythms.

The plays are driven by descriptive passages, especially character portraits. While the plot of *Ṭayf al-Khayāl* creates a certain motive force, the play might also be understood as a succession of characters who enter and introduce themselves or are described for the audience's pleasure. The second play in the sequence, *ʿAjīb wa Gharīb* (*Weird and Wonderful*), provides us with an example in which plot is subordinated entirely to a succession of colorful and grotesque characters.¹¹ The exposition of characters one-by-one no doubt enabled the puppeteer to showcase the finely-crafted shadow-puppets to the best effect, without having to manipulate too many puppets at once. While *Ṭayf al-Khayāl* is not as reliant on character introductions as is *ʿAjīb wa Gharīb*, character introductions are nonetheless a central framework, and in some ways more important than the plot within which they are situated.

While Ibn Dāniyāl's shadow plays are vehicles for the satirical, the parodic, and the obscene, they also often allude to a background understanding of the shadow play as a salutary metaphor for the fleeting, shadow-like nature of

9 See Everett Rowson, "Mujūn," in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, eds Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey (London, 1998), pp. 546–48.

10 Guo, *Performing Arts*, pp. 108–11.

11 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, pp. 55–89.

the world, and the disjunction between apparent form and essential reality.¹² While Ibn Dāniyāl does not employ this metaphor intensively, he does allude to the metaphorical nature of the shadow play in several instances, suggesting that the grotesquery and obscenity of his drama is available to do important metaphorical work for his audience, if they take it in a particular spirit. This is most clearly visible at the ending of *ʿAjīb wa Gharīb*:

By God! Were it not for the fear of boring [you] I would, without stopping, have spoken speeches

In which are amazing maxims [*mustaghrib*¹³ *al-amthāl*].¹⁴ But my virtuous brethren

Have tried to attain the reality behind the performance [*ḥaqīqat al-khayāl*], and forced me to that with their requests.

I said to them (while asking my Lord, the glorious, for forgiveness): "It is an act of emulation [*imtithāl*]."¹⁵

The vocabulary of this passage points in several directions. The word *imtithāl*, can also be interpreted as an "act of obedience or conformity," which would usually suggest an act of conformity to the law, but may also allude to the process of representing reality. The dichotomy between *khayāl* and *ḥaqīqa* indicates the shadow play itself. This "reality" may refer to the physical world beyond the shadows on the screen, or it may indicate the inner truth of the apparently facetious utterances. Thus, the dichotomy activates a philosophical framework that points beyond the mere difference between puppets and people. The word *khayāl* means both performance¹⁶ and image, or imagination. *Khayāl* refers to the imaginative faculty of Aristotelian philosophy, whose significance was extended by the Andalusian mystical philosopher Ibn ʿArabī as the faculty connecting humankind with the higher, non-corporeal realm of images and archetypes: the *ʿālam al-khayāl* or the *ʿālam al-mithāl*.¹⁷ Though the precise meaning of *khayāl* differs according to different philosophical systems,

12 See Guo, *Performing Arts*, pp. 105–8; Butorović, *Sociology*, pp. 33–75; Moreh, *Live Theater*, pp. 46–61.

13 *Mustaghrib* is based on the adjective *gharīb*, meaning strange, uncanny, foreign or queer. *Gharīb* is also the name of one of the protagonists of this, the second play in the sequence.

14 *Mathal*, pl. *amthāl* also means likeness.

15 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 89.

16 See Moreh, *Live Theater*.

17 See William Chittick, "Ibn Arabi." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition). Edited by Edward N. Zalta. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/ibn-arabi/> (accessed 19 June 2015).

Ibn Dāniyāl's allusion to this dichotomy activates a philosophical framework in which images and imaginings are a gateway to a greater truth. Ultimately, though, Ibn Dāniyāl leaves the moral ambiguous. It is not clear what the significance of the revelation that the reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of the performance is an emulation; it seems to obfuscate meaning. The statement lacks the clear theological implications drawn out by other writers, merely hinting that there may be some way of fitting Ibn Dāniyāl's shadow plays into an existing understanding of the shadow play as being a reservoir of salutary metaphor. Positioned at the end of *ʿAjīb wa Gharīb*, it stresses the transition between the illusory world of imitation and performance, and the world of reality, whatever that might be understood to be. Ultimately, it leaves any sententious moralizing to the audience, allowing space for both moralizing and subversive readings of the plays.

1 Complex Framings

Ṭayf al-Khayāl, and with it the sequence of all three shadow plays, begins with a subversion of genre. The play begins with a preface to introduce the work to its audience, a pastiche of the conventional epistolary request in which an author responds to demands that he should write the work in hand. In this case, the preface is addressed to a puppet master who is said to have asked Ibn Dāniyāl to pen a shadow play: "Esteemed sir, you disreputable old libertine! (May your screen remain erected, and your curtain closed)."¹⁸ Here the appropriate epistolary politesse is undermined, and the typical blessing is replaced with implicitly obscene insinuation.¹⁹ The playwright then explains why he took on the job of writing these plays:

You wrote to me to say that the ears of the people have wearied of the shadow play, and they stay away, because of its repetition. And you asked me to compose for you something in this line—a novel piece for the characters in the puppet box. At first, my sense of shame prevented me, but then I saw that if I did not fulfill your desire, you would get the false impression that I am not game for a challenge. So I took a stroll in the meadows of my debauchery, and responded to your question in good

18 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 1.

19 There is some difference among the play's translators about the interpretation of this line. Guo, in particular, emphasizes the obscene undertones in his translation: "Though your screen is still hanging high, || your curtain is dangling low": Guo, *Performing Arts*, p. 158.

time, and I composed a few licentious plays—stuff of quality, not mere frivolity ...²⁰

The playwright marks the scurrilous nature expected of shadow plays; it is his sense of shame or modesty (*hayāʾ*) that might prevent him from writing a shadow play.²¹

Towards the end of this preface, generic expectations of the epistle form dissolve, as the author's introduction streams smoothly into stage directions, and he instructs the puppet-master to bring out the first character in the play: "So bring out Ṭayf al-Khayāl to the round opening [of the shadow screen], and begin the anthem, and sing this verse in the *rāst* mode ..." ²² The puppet-master now appears to be present, while the figure of the author withdraws. The puppet-master sings a song introducing the shadow play, and its eponymous character, the hunchback, Ṭayf al-Khayāl.

Following the puppet-master's introduction, but before the action commences, the puppet-master too withdraws and Ṭayf al-Khayāl presents an exordium. This signals that we are still in the prefatory section of the play by following typical literary models by calling upon the Prophet Muhammad to bless the venture that the performer and audience are embarking upon:

And now, before I start my dance in this play,
And just before I begin to say my piece,
I glorify high God, the tremendous One.
A God who is far above this world and the next.
And after this I pray to the Prophet Muhammad ...²³

After several more lines, this pious invocation terminates with a wry touch:

And I ask the forgiving Lord of all mankind
To prolong for us the lives of those in audience²⁴
And keep them ever in good jollity.

20 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 1.

21 This seems to contradict Guo's suggestion that Ibn Dāniyāl was innovating in bringing obscenity to the shadow play: Guo, *Performing Arts*, p. 94. At the end of the second of Ibn Dāniyāl's shadow plays we see a confirmation of the generally scurrilous nature of such plays.

22 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 1.

23 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 3.

24 "*Yudīmu lanā hāʾulā al-ḥuḍūr*". Guo has, "I ask the forgiving Lord,/ to prolong the lives of all the gentlemen here present." However, this does not reflect the "*lanā*," ("for us"), which

So say, "Amen!" with me, my companions!
I've come to tell you some of what I've seen.²⁵

In this way, a formalistic invocation to the prophet and his family is made to introduce the performance of a set of obscenities to an audience gathered precisely for that purpose. The audience is referred to as both "disobedient sinners" (*al-ʿuṣāt min al-mudhnibīn*), as well as "pious and noble gentlemen" (*al-sāda al-atqiyā al-kirām*). But this kind of mixed intention is not out of place. Invocations to the Prophet are standard in all realms of human activity, so why not in embarking on a litany of licentiousness? Ṭayf al-Khayāl comfortably mixes the ironic flattery of the fairground barker with conventionalized pious humility characteristic of formal literary invocations.

Ṭayf al-Khayāl then gives a kind of apologia for the scurrilous content of the play. After his pious invocation he says: "Were it not for my profligacy [*khalāʿa*] I would have desisted. But on the other hand, the eye of profligacy can be beneficial."²⁶ At this moment, as Ṭayf al-Khayāl pivots away from the prefatory segment and towards the action, the note of formalistic apology that the author's preface struck is mutating into an attitude of greater sympathy to the obscenity which will ensue. He goes on to highlight the educational possibilities in obscenity. Ṭayf al-Khayāl goes on:

Know then that every character has an archetype [*mithāl*]. As it is said in the proverbs [*amthāl*] "There are truths to be found among the slops, which can't be found in baskets." On the other hand, every style has its own method, and behind every performance is a reality [*taḥt kull khayāl ḥaqīqa*]. Fun affords a break from the weary earnestness of life. Bad luck throws good luck into relief. And while a beautiful young thing can grow tiresome, well—an ugly one can be beautified!²⁷

This is an ambiguous kind of moralizing, celebrating the inversion of apparent realities. While it may indicate that we should draw a moral message behind the libertinage, it might also suggest the reverse. Ṭayf al-Khayāl's moralizing degenerates further as the speech progresses into jokes and obscenities, covering the sexual activities and vices of a multitude of Cairene reprobates:

seems to suggest that Ṭayf al-khayāl's (or the puppet-master's) prayer here is not without self-interest.

25 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 3.

26 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 3.

27 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 4.

One who is slapped is forbearing, the flasher gives of himself generously, a rent boy is plain-dealing and the versatile partner provides. The fee extracted from someone you fuck is humiliation. Creeping up on a sleeper²⁸ is bold and fearless. Hobbling someone is a violent capture of prey ... Jealousy is stingy and foolish. Masturbation is contentment—it is the specter of wakefulness and the cure for an erection. Now, regardless of whether we are talking of business or animal instinct, the market for either is always erected, and its income keeps coming. Shrewd ones know how to loosen its purse strings. Being buggered is the peccadillo of the pampered, and the pleasure of the chancery pen-pushers. And what is it to you that these things are called ugly when everything is attractive in its own way?²⁹

By this point, Ibn Dāniyāl has constructed an unashamed descent from the apologetic moralizing of the preface, to an unapologetic apologia for untrammelled speech about unspeakable acts, bristling with untranslatable puns and humorous allusions.

In addition to the formally pious invocation near the start of the play, there is also a pious ending, in which the vice and obscenity is abruptly followed by short, but apparently sincere statements of repentance. The point at which obscenity pivots towards piety is upon the death of the incorrigible procurer and matchmaker, Mother Guidance.³⁰ She is the subject of a parodic elegy which combines elements of wistful nostalgia for her sins, with derisive insults, but leads ultimately to a conventional musing upon the transitory nature of life on earth. This is followed by a short speech in favor of repentance by the hunchback, Ṭayf al-Khayāl, in which he asserts the nature of the language of poets: “Repentance is best ... and we, the breed³¹ of poets, say what we do not do.”³² This is followed by the ritualistic repentance of the

28 “Dabb”: Everett Rowson, “The Categorization of Gender and Sexual Irregularity in Medieval Arabic Vice Lists,” in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, eds Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York, 1991), pp. 50–79; p. 67.

29 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 4. The translation of the terms in this passage is heavily indebted to Everett Rowson (“Vice Lists”).

30 For a comparative treatment of the figure of the matchmaker in Spanish and Arabic, including a discussion of Mother Guidance, see Maria Kotzamanidou, “The Spanish and Arabic Characterization of the Go-Between in the Light of Popular Performance,” *Hispanic Review* 48 (1980), pp. 91–109.

31 Reading, with Guo, *qawm*, instead of *qimam* (Guo, *Performing Arts*, p. 219 n.721).

32 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 53.

protagonist, Commander Copulation (Amīr Wiṣāl), who pledges to go on the Hajj pilgrimage:

Oh my brother, Ṭayf al-Khayāl! All that remains is to set off, for I have determined upon the Ḥijāz, and I have gone out of the metaphorical into reality, and I intend to wash away these sins with the water of [the holy well of] Zamzam.³³

This statement of Commander Copulation's final repentance, then, fits clearly within the generic framework of the shadow play, in which the fictive, representative nature of the play is deemed as particularly salutary fodder for contemplation for its audience. It should be noted that the central conceit of the play, and the structuring principle of the action, has been a ludicrous and insincere repentance made by Commander Copulation soon after he appeared. This need not disturb the structural importance of the moral closure provided by the repentance at this point, but it does point to the fact that two acts of repentance by the same character in the same play may signal different meanings. The first is ludicrous and comic, whereas the final acts as closure to structure the boundary between the play and the world.

The conventionality of the pious closure in *Ṭayf al-Khayāl* can be seen in the fact that all the plays in Ibn Dāniyāl's three-play sequence have similar pious invocations at the end. Thus, the second play, *ʿAjīb wa Gharīb*, ends its succession of clowns and criminals with a straight man: ʿAssāf al-Ḥādī, the camel driver who travels to Mecca on the pilgrimage. The finale of the last play, *al-Mutayyam wa al-dāʿiʿ al-yutayyim*, is the most striking in its turn from vice, perhaps as a way of achieving a more final closure for the sequence, as the protagonist does not merely repent, but dies and is carried off by the Angel of Death.³⁴ It is noteworthy that all of these endings associate the transition from the content of the play to the non-play with a significant ritual rite of passage: pilgrimage, ablution, and death and transition to the next world. Thus, we may understand that repentance, apology, and ritual purification are part of the very structure of these plays, as a formal and moral frame that allows for the vice and obscenity to be performed in safe quarantine.³⁵ If the play's frame

33 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 54.

34 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, pp. 116–17.

35 Cyrus Ali Zargar argues that the satiric register is to be clearly distinguished from the pious content. He suggests that in the “somber and didactic conclusion,” the work “ceases to be satirical.”: Cyrus Ali Zargar, “The Satiric Method of Ibn Dāniyāl: Morality and Anti-Morality in ‘Ṭayf al-Khayāl,’” *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 37.1 (2006), pp. 68–108; p.75. He later says that this requires that, “the moralistic ending must be read separately from the

suggests that we must return to morality on one hand, it is also true that the moral frame sanctions the entrance into the subversive and the scurrilous. It is true that Ibn Dāniyāl's text is satirical, highlighting the vice and hypocrisy of its characters, and thereby their referents in society, but we cannot thereby reduce the libertine content to a parable.³⁶ The frisson of the play comes not from a rather hasty and ambiguous moral message but from the vicarious experience of transgression.

2 Transgression, Potency and Female Agency

Within these framings, the play proceeds with a series of parodic set-pieces which systematically subvert both poetic conventions and satirize a range of different social types: the Mamluk ruling elite, court poets, doctors, brides and grooms, matchmakers and so on. The protagonist is not the play's eponym, Ṭayf al-Khayāl, the hunchback, who is more of a chorus and curator of the action. The plot centers on his master and patron, Commander Copulation (*Amīr Wiṣāl*), a debauched member of the ruling elite. The plot takes its cue from Sultan Baybars' violent campaign against vice, after which, Commander Copulation determines to repent, leave his libertine life, and get married. At various points in the play, however, he suggests that a lack of funds to maintain his libertine lifestyle has motivated this repentance.³⁷ He calls for a matchmaker and madam named Mother Guidance (*Umm Rashīd*) to procure him a wife. And indeed, she is a procurer in the literal sense, dealing more in prostitutes than chaste brides. There is a heavy irony in the fact that Commander Copulation's repentance starts with asking a madam to find him a wife. Ultimately, his repentance is shown to be ridiculous, very much through the agency of Mother Guidance, for after he marries the bride she has produced, when the veil is removed the bride proves to be old and hideous.

Mother Guidance embodies the comprehensive inversion of feminine ideals. In order to see this, we might compare her character and actions with the list of the virtues of a good wife given by Ghazālī in *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*: piety,

play's satiric mood, as a necessary return to reality that puts the exaggerated puppet anti-morality in its proper place ... This is not to say that the ending serves no organic literary purpose—certainly it provides closure and a happy resolution" (p. 102).

36 For a reading that emphasizes the Sufi mystical allusions, see Zargar, "The Satiric Method," pp. 105–08.

37 In one instance, for example, he suggests that after he has run out of money, he turns from young men (presumably prostitutes) to women: Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 35.

good character (avoiding such defects as loquacity, foul-language, ungratefulness), beauty (in order to prevent her husband from being tempted to sexual transgression), an inexpensive bride-price, fertility, virginity (for the previous intimacy is understood to interfere with both the husband and the wife's ability to invest themselves in the current relationship), good lineage, and the absence of consanguinity.³⁸ In a comparable tone, a conventional litany of the virtues of marriage is presented within the play by the marriage contractor who presides at Commander Copulation's wedding, focusing upon fertility and salvation.³⁹ Mother Guidance, on the other hand, is unchaste, powerfully autonomous, and violently opposed to procreation, preferring tribadism with another woman to penetration by a man. This inversion of sexual orthodoxy marks her out as a subversive grotesque within the play. Before she enters, the Commander says of Mother Guidance "She is one of the delicate, fine ladies, one of the tender tribades [*al-musāḥiqāt al-liṭāf*]."⁴⁰ Satan⁴¹ kisses the ground before her every day."⁴² The Commander and Mother Guidance form a complementary pair in their dual distaste for procreative sex. On hearing his request for a bride, she says, "How strange! You always used to hate women and love men!"⁴³

We first hear of Mother Guidance through the description of Commander Copulation, who praises her as the perfect person to find him a wife. However, even before she arrives, we suspect that the Commander's hopes in her will be foiled, for he extolls her virtues as a procurer rather than an honorable matchmaker.⁴⁴ When she arrives, she immediately proceeds to humiliate the Commander, by fondly remembering his mother, and suggesting that she groomed him for prostitution:

38 Lev Weitz notes that many of these are also shared by the list given by the Christian bishop Bar Hebraeus in his *Ethicon*: Lev Weitz, "Al-Ghazālī, Bar Hebraeus, and the 'Good Wife,'" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 134.2 (2014), pp. 203–23.

39 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 27. These sentiments are immediately undermined, however. See below.

40 Rather than translating this as "lesbian" as Guo does, it is perhaps safer to stick with "tribade," which more narrowly describes a mechanical activity, rather than a more modern kind of sexual identity, and thereby is closer to the Arabic *musāḥiqā*. This does not thereby preclude the existence of affective lesbian relationships, but this would be an extension. See Rowson, "Vice Lists," pp. 62–64.

41 Literally "*Iblīs*."

42 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 23.

43 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 25.

44 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 22.

His mother, how industrious she was with regards to Copulation (*Wiṣāl*), with boasting and coquetry, in embellishing him, and adorning him, and plaiting his hair, and discounting his price.⁴⁵

Ṭayf al-Khayāl attempts to hush her: “Be quiet, lest he hear you, and is upset and slaps you. For today he is not of that type!” However, Mother Guidance ignores this warning and goes on to narrate a scurrilous story of seduction at a Qur’ān school (*kuttāb*) by “the master of her house.” This firmly establishes her as a device for humiliating the Commander, though he pretends to ignore her, and turn her attention instead to the task of procuring him a wife.

At first, Mother Guidance appears to play along with Commander Copulation’s request for a bride of conventional beauty. She claims she has just the bride for him and recites a fairly typical *qaṣīda* ode on the beauty of this bride, but then, in the following passage of rhymed prose, she hints at the bride’s inevitable shortcomings:

Son, I have a girl [for you] who is like the illuminating sun, except that she conceived a hatred of⁴⁶ her first husband because of the pain of deflowering, and the midwife treated her with an agonizing medicine [*dawā’ maḍḍāḍ*]. Then, bless her! she took up tribadism [*siḥāq*], and she got used to it at the house of her teacher, Umm Ishāq.⁴⁷

Mother Guidance then admits that she herself also had a sexual preference for “placing one horseshoe upon another”⁴⁸ since her youth. The sexual activities of Mother Guidance and her protégé are subversive, from a male perspective, undermining the role of women as objects of male gratification, making them sexually self-sufficient. This act of undermining, is, of course, primarily directed at foiling Commander Copulation, who acts as the central focus for the plot and the central butt of the play’s jokes, but it opens a space for the contemplation of this kind of pleasure among women. The audience, no doubt, would have relished the irony that the Commander was attempting to

45 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 23.

46 *Nafīrat*, which can mean “flee from” or “have an aversion for.”

47 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 26.

48 Guo is unsure of the translation here, giving it as “enjoying one horseshoe and shunning another (?)”: Guo, *Performing Arts*, p. 188. But if read quite literally, the metaphor works perfectly without any difficulty. The idea of placing one horseshoe upon another must refer to the meeting of two sets of female genitals, something that is seen as an aberration from the norm of a horseshoe being placed in contact with a horse’s hoof or leg: that is, the male genitals.

get marriage advice from a man-hating procurer who sympathizes with the girl who shunned her first husband and turned to sex with women instead. There is a discomforting (to a male audience) idea here of a potent alliance of women who foil men's sexual desire. However the extent of this potency is limited by the fact that the men who are humiliated in the process seem to deserve it. It is not, therefore an alliance against all men, so much as a device to punish the wayward male agent.

Mother Guidance remains a powerful character. It is true, there is a certain concession to the structural inevitability of a woman having to owe service to a man, and Mother Guidance does indeed refer to a certain man as "the master of my house" (*ṣāhib baytī*), which Guo understands to be her pimp, as well as having a husband, a Qur'ān-teacher for boys, the cleric (*faqīh* or *shaykh*) 'Aflaq. However, neither pimp nor husband appears to exercise much domination over Mother Guidance, sexual or otherwise. Instead, the pimp's desires drive him to get the Qur'ān teacher drunk in order to seduce the boys he teaches. As for the husband, Shaykh 'Aflaq, he is very old and, when he appears, complains bitterly of his sexual impotence.⁴⁹ Mother Guidance, on the other hand, appears to be an independent operator, generating income as a procurer and matchmaker and acting as a go-between for men and women.⁵⁰

3 Sexual Pleasure, Linguistic Pleasure

Much of the humor and pleasure of the play comes from a mixture of poetic virtuosity and the excitation created by the transgressive poetics of *mujūn*, which delight in transgression of the boundaries of conventional morality. This is true both of the passages written in high-style following the formal conventions of the *qaṣīda* ode or the *urjūza*, and the earthier rhymes and rhythms of the more vernacular rhymed prose in which the action takes place. Mother Guidance's language is no exception to this mixture of poetic pleasure and transgressive excitation. When she introduces herself, her description of her transgressive sexual activity features particularly ebullient rhymes: "When I was young ... I was considered by the fine ladies to be one of the gentle tribades: a rubber, a frigger, a grinder!"⁵¹ However unsuitable these activities may have been considered, the intensified use of rhyme at this point lends an

49 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, pp. 48–55.

50 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, pp. 22–23.

51 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 26: "*ma'dūda 'inda al-nisā' al-ẓirāf min al-musāhiqātal-khifāf: dallāka, farrāka, ḥakkāka*".

effervescent excitement to her activities. There follow a string of metaphors for sexual activity between women: "I would put the *lakhālikh* perfume in a Yemeni jar, and brew the quince seeds on a Chinese plate. I would resist hornets and snakes.^[52] When I rubbed, I would only use banyan tree oil."⁵³ These references to opulent commodities evoke luxury and sensuality. The type of sexuality that her character displays is anti-male and delights in female-on-female sex, unsettling to a male audience, but also paradoxically pleasurable.

4 In (Dis)praise of Procreation

The illicit nature of Mother Guidance's sexuality, however, lies less in female homosexual activity, than her eschewing of male interference. As we have seen, she is sympathetic to her protégé's rejection of her husband and preference for women. Despite her claim to lightness of touch, Mother Guidance also claims that, "I was stronger than those stallions of husbands."⁵⁴ She goes on to describe her distaste at having to bear and raise children, and complains of rough treatment at the hands of her husband.

When Mother Guidance brings the bride she has chosen for Commander Copulation, the bride remains veiled, a custom which allows for the subterfuge to be played on the Commander which results in his being married to a hideous grandmother with an equally disgusting grandchild. The marriage contractor arrives to formalize the marriage, and he makes a sententious moralizing speech, which, however, suggests that the performer is winking at the audience throughout:

Thanks be to God, who veils faults, who knows all hidden things, who brings hearts together. I witness that there is no God but God, the forgiver of sins, and I witness that Muḥammad is his servant and his Prophet, the truth-telling the pure, the beloved, may God pray eternal prayers for him and for his family and his companions.⁵⁵

Even while he is acting as a mouthpiece for conventional morality, the marriage contractor appears to be undermining his own statements. The hypocrisy

52 That is, male genitals.

53 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 26. I have relied on Guo's translation for this passage: Guo, *Performing Arts*, p. 188.

54 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 26.

55 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, pp. 26–27.

of this conventional, formalistic morality is betrayed by his invoking God as “He who covers up all faults” (*sātir al-ʿuyūb*). This is not one of the famous 99 names of God, but rather an innovative attribute that particularly suits Commander Copulation’s purposes of covering up his career as a libertine through marriage. There follows a parody of a conventional speech in praise of marriage, dealing with the solemnity of marriage, and the importance of reproduction, but though it starts in typical praise, it degenerates into suggestions that marriage is not, in fact, so advisable:

The fruit [of marriage] is children ... they perpetuate the household, and ensure multiplication, and blood-feuds will catch up with them and they will be spoken of them as a distress.⁵⁶

From a typical eulogy of marriage, the moral intent of this speech disintegrates to suggest that marriage and procreation are, in fact, productive of misery.

And indeed, it is clear that the Commander’s aim in getting married has little to do with a sincere reformation. He tells Ṭayf al-Khayāl, “Indeed, I have set out to my marriage only after necessity and privation.”⁵⁷ His libertinism has led to him running out of money, leading to him being able to afford decreasingly satisfactory sexual partners. He ranks progress through various types of transgressive sex with youths and female whores who are at the top of the hierarchy of the conventionally sexually attractive,⁵⁸ but also moving on to effeminates, bearded men, then old men, domestic animals and livestock, leading down to sexual partners who are, literally, at the bottom of the food chain:⁵⁹

I have fucked anything crawling upon the earth, living, that had the merest breath in it,

None of them have escaped me: even a crawling scorpion and a stinging jungle hornet.⁶⁰

This provides us with a clear hierarchy of sexual desirability with women and beardless youths at the top. Notably, at the point at which we meet Commander Copulation, he has run out of money and marriage appears to be the very last resort, after the sources of sexual gratification have dried up. While the

56 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 27.

57 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 37.

58 See Rowson, “Vice Lists.”

59 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, pp. 37–38.

60 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 38.

repentance of Commander Copulation reinforces conventional boundaries between right behavior and wrong behavior, it also indicates the existence of an alternative set of principles promoting pleasure, rather than morality. Within this alternative universe, there is a heavy distrust of procreation as an obstacle to the free pursuit of pleasure.

The greatest indictment of procreation, perhaps, comes from the character of the grandchild of the bride. Commander Copulation's wedding unsurprisingly turns out to be a fiasco. He goes through the motions, playing the lover with formal verses upon the beauty of his bride, who is named Lock, Daughter of Key. When he finally unveils his bride at the wedding, however, she is hideous, and causes the Commander to faint. Even more grotesque is the bride's grandchild, who tags along also. The character of the grandchild is a nightmare child, with constant, insistent demands to be fed and for his feces to be cleaned up.⁶¹ The depiction of this child is calculated to inspire revulsion, in sharp contrast to the conventional understanding of the joy of having children,⁶² and the enraged Commander beats up the baby and the bride and breaks up the wedding. While the Commander is conforming to his grotesque persona, rather like his European puppet-counterpart, the baby-beating Mister Punch, the audience is complicit in entertaining the Commander's subversive distaste for procreation when greeted with its monstrous fruits.

5 The Perils of Stepping Out of Character

Both Mother Guidance, and Commander Copulation, then, embody a rejection of procreation in favor of an untrammelled, infertile sexuality. In contrast to Mother Guidance's unapologetic embrace of an illicit, subversive set of practices, however, Commander Copulation's repentance pushes against his own stereotyped character. His attempt to move from the demi-monde towards conventional morality is therefore a poetic transgression which cannot ultimately be permitted. Having laid out the essential characteristics of his character in his self-introductory speech, he cannot then step beyond the stereotype to reform himself, any more than the named characters of "Knowledge" or "Death" in a medieval morality play could change their essential function. Commander Copulation is only able to repent seriously when the action of the

61 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, pp. 41–42.

62 The joy of having children is made explicit in the Qur'ān, 18:64, which includes children, alongside wealth, among the pleasures of the world that must be set aside to attain the true rewards granted by God in Paradise.

play is at an end when he no longer has to act as a character, but rather only has to vocalize the final framing of the play. This allows the audience to return to reality from the quarantined carnivalesque space of transgressive behavior and speech.

6 Death and Repentance

Mother Guidance's final appearance in the play is at the wedding of Commander Copulation. After Commander Copulation's wedding has ended in chaos, he summons Mother Guidance and her husband, the superannuated Shaykh 'Aflaq to be punished. Shaykh 'Aflaq gives an extended lament upon his aging, replete with anecdotes of sexual impotence, and ridiculous attempts to reclaim his youth. However, Mother Guidance, we are told, has died during a period of plague.⁶³ In dying she escapes Commander Copulation's punishment, and her final words are reported by the doctor who was present at her death. Her final speech is a parodic testament in which she abjures those left behind her to maintain the brothel and continue in vice:

I bequeath to you, oh so-and-so, the living of this place, to live in health, and to succeed to my position on behalf of the lovers, and to join hearts [*tu'allif bayn al-qulūb*]⁶⁴ and to bring together the lover and the beloved ...

And as for all you whores! You who populate these courtyards! You must be faithful in your trysts, and strive on behalf of those clients, even if it is the night of Eid. Be hospitable in the lovers' sessions and sell sex even when it is against your inclination!

And then death came upon her.⁶⁵

It is notable that Mother Guidance focuses upon the service of male pleasure in this final testament, emphasizing her persona as the madam of a brothel, rather than the more unsettling and transgressive aspect of her female-on-female sexual activity, as if seeking a more comfortable closure.

There follows a mock elegy for Mother Guidance, given by the doctor. This elegy is filled with a kind of ironic nostalgia, which recapitulates the mood of an earlier elegy on the death of Satan, inspired by the violent purging of the brothels and taverns by Sultan Baybars. The libertine logic results in an

63 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, pp. 51–52.

64 Incidentally, this is what God is described as doing by the marriage contractor. See above.

65 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 52.

elegy that praises the sinful activities of Mother Guidance. Again, it is her service to male desire that is lauded. Midway in the elegy, the eulogistic mode pivots suddenly towards more pure insults, indeed desecration of Mother Guidance's body:

So lament for Mother Terrible, and cry for her loss: indeed her loss is a holiday!

So wash her corpse with the urine of every sinner, or with the dregs of the wine, or bandages,

And make dick-cheese her funerary balm, with the camphor of slave-dung.

...

And carry her on the cocks of the Christians, as they do at the festival of the crucifixion.⁶⁶

While, during her life, Mother Guidance has snubbed the penis, in death, her corpse is washed, embalmed and carried by penises. Her corpse is desecrated by the relics of vice: the dregs of wine and impure bodily fluids, including discharge from penises, menstrual blood and the dirty run-off from the public baths.⁶⁷ In spite of this festival of desecration, the final line pivots back to an estimation of her value as a procurer: "Mention her with everything that is evil and rotten, and keep on guiding and pimping towards her every day."⁶⁸

Immediately after this mock elegy to Mother Guidance, Ṭayf al-Khayāl and Commander Copulation enunciate the final repentance which belongs to the framing of the play. Thus the mock elegy is the final part of the play proper. Although Mother Guidance has gone unpunished by the Commander, her death from the plague and the insulting elegy act as a means of righting the balance and reestablishing conventional norms to reverse the libertine logic of the play.

While Mother Guidance is vouchsafed a desecration, Commander Copulation finally participates in a purifying ritual that acts also as the frame of the story, and a transition for the audience out of the impurity and vice of the play. At the end of the play, Ṭayf al-Khayāl is given a speech of apology and defense of the author. He uses a penitent formula: "May the Great God forgive these traits" (*istaghfuru allah al-ʿaẓīm min hadhihi al-khiṣāl*).⁶⁹ In the very final

66 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 53.

67 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 53.

68 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 53.

69 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 53.

statement, Commander Copulate repents and promises to make a pilgrimage to purify his crimes in the waters of the holy well of Zamzam in Mecca. This acts as a rite of passage taking the audience out of the scurrilous inverted logic of a libertine text.

7 Mother Guidance and the Carnavalesque

The dangerously autonomous pleasure of Mother Guidance functions on the plane of a carnivalesque duality,⁷⁰ both reaffirming the existence of norms by transgressing them, while also rehearsing subversive desires and articulating them publicly, drawing our attention to them. This is, perhaps how obscene humor functions: it acknowledges its own illicit nature, but does not attempt to bring down the boundaries, for these boundaries are prerequisite to the delicious act of onstage violation of norms and the chastity of language. The delicious grotesque transgressions of *Ṭayf al-Khayāl* can be compared to other carnivalesque “Lords of Misrule,” such as Shakespeare’s Falstaff, Pulcinella of the *commedia dell’arte* and its English variant, Mister Punch. The libertine logic of *Ṭayf al-Khayāl* undermines conventional norms of behavior, and moral assumptions, at least during the quarantined illusions of the shadow play. The synthesis of high and vernacular literary styles, and the mixing of ebullient grotesques with more conventional figures of beauty, temporarily flatten hierarchies within an explicit framework in which “the ugly can be beautiful,” and lessons can be learnt from licentiousness. Exactly what these lessons are is left unspoken, or left in dialogic tension between the drawing of moral lessons, and a more libertine reading supported by the ironic undermining and mixing which piety is subjected to within the play. The final moralistic pivot might be

70 While Ibn Dāniyāl does not fit into Bakhtin’s Eurocentric vision of modernity as a stage in the history of literature and philosophy, we can make use of Bakhtin’s conception of the subversive role of the grotesque in literature: “The activities of the carnival square: collective ridicule of officialdom, inversion of hierarchy, violations of decorum and proportion, celebration of bodily excess and so on embody, for Bakhtin, an implicit popular conception of the world. This conception is not, however, able to become ideologically elaborated until the radical laughter of the square entered into the ‘world of great literature’”: Craig Brandist, “The Bakhtin Circle,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/bakhtin/#H5/> (Accessed 11 June 2015). I am not the first to resort to Bakhtin to interpret Ibn Dāniyāl: see Francesca Corrao, “Luoghi e immaginario nel teatro dello ombre di Ibn Dāniyāl al-Mawṣili,” *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 3 (2008), pp. 121–34; Safi Mahfouz, *Theatre from Medieval Cairo*, p. xli; Li Guo, “The Devil’s Advocate: Ibn Dāniyāl’s Art of Parody in His Qasidah No. 71,” *Mamluk Studies Review*, 7.1 (2003), pp. 177–209; p. 188; idem, “Paradise Lost,” p. 227.

understood as a kind of pure moral to the dirty tale, but it might also be seen as a way of sanctioning and quarantining the pleasurable performance of vice.

The work rests upon the assumption of male agency and a male perspective. The plot revolves around a grotesque male anti-hero Commander Copulation being foiled by a grotesque female anti-heroine, Mother Guidance. Given this basically male perspective, it is interesting the extent to which the kinds of transgression that they are active in are, in many ways, balanced. Commander Copulation wants to penetrate everything, while Mother Guidance rejects penetration. Both characters eschew marriage and procreation. The Commander insincerely seeks an ideal wife, and Mother Guidance insincerely provides him with a wife who turns out to be anything but ideal. The crisis of the play is brought about by the attempt of Commander Copulation to turn over a new leaf. Mother Guidance is a mechanism for foiling his attempt to step beyond the boundaries of his stereotyped character of vicious libertine. In a sense, his failure is determined by the poetic requirements that a stereotyped character retains its fundamental characteristics, those characteristics explicitly stated in his self-introduction upon his first appearance. Mother Guidance, on the other hand, remains true to the central elements of her grotesque character as a tribade and procurer. Though she dies and is mocked and denigrated after her death, it is Commander Copulation who undergoes onstage humiliation. Mother Guidance remains powerful in the memory; powerful both in terms of her onstage agency, and as a pure literary creation.

Where Ibn Dāniyāl does allude to the metaphorical, illusory nature of the shadow play, it is not accompanied by clear indications of a moralizing message. The pious passages are short, and are imperfectly separated from the ribald and the satirical. Pious sayings are themselves satirized, especially in the case of the marriage contractor's words in praise of procreation.⁷¹ A pious reading of this text is not impossible. It appears that such a framework is part of the legacy of the shadow play, thereby foisted upon anyone who took up the form. However, Ibn Dāniyāl's use of the form emphasizes instead the register *mujūn*, licentious literature, as an end in itself. To quote again Ṭayf al-Khayāl's words:

"There are truths to be found among the slops, which can't be found in baskets." ... Fun affords a break from the weary earnestness of life. Bad luck throws good luck into relief. And while a beautiful young thing can grow tiresome, well—an ugly one can be beautified!⁷²

71 See Zargar, "The Satiric Method," pp. 88–94, for more examples of the satirical usage of religious language.

72 Ibn Dāniyāl, *Three Shadow Plays*, p. 4.

If we take this humorous statement seriously, then the sexual transgression of Mother Guidance, while grotesque, can be seen as a fitting inhabitant of the world of the transgressive poetics of *mujūn*, engendering an aesthetic *jouissance* which derives paradoxical pleasure from the ugly, the inverted, and the transgressive.

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